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# What Are The Social Responsibilities Of Scientists?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System planned in conjunction with the second in a series of six academic conferences being conducted by Northwestern University during its Centennial.

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# What Are The Social Responsibilities Of Scientists?

MR. MCBURNEY: Our first speaker by special transcription is Gordon Dean, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. Mr. Dean:

MR. DEAN: Mr. Moderator, you posed the question of the social responsibilities of scientists. The quick and easy answer is that they are the same responsibilities that are borne by nonscientific citizens. This is true, of course, but we have to take a longer look at the question because of the nature of affairs in the world today. Scientists, pure and applied, do more to change the nature and problems of the society we all live in than any other group.

## Can Scientist Help?

Does this fact give them any special competence or unusual obligation to help us change our customs, our laws, and policies to meet the changes they create? Can they help in a special way to make these changes add up to good for all concerned? Just because a man is a scientist it does not necessarily follow that he is especially gifted to cope with the problems of social, economic or political change. But scientists do have a method of solving the problems of research in nature that might be adapted to solving the social problems that the achievements of science bring upon us.

President Conant of Harvard has pointed this out in his brand new book, *Science and Common Sense.* In his summation Dr. Conant raises this question, and I quote: "Will the introduction of science into the practical art of organizing human society be of benefit?" My answer is definitely, "Yes."

Here then, on the word of a leader in science, is one responsibility of natural science: to help social scientists and lay leaders of affairs develop more precise ways of handling social problems, methods that are more likely to produce good results than those in use today. This is not to say that men of science must have all the answers to the situation that they create.

Take one that is with us right now. The Census Bureau has just told us that the number of persons in the United States over sixty-five years of age in 1950 has doubled in the decade since the 1940 census. The advances in medical science and techniques of public health brought this about. Would you believe that it is the responsibility of the medical scientist to take the lead in disposing of the problems created by this particular social phenomenon — problems like those of providing for the gainful employment of these aged, for their recreation, perhaps of changes in social security and tax laws, and of assessment of their political power?

## 'Give Us the Facts'

I think the answer is "No." It is up to all of us. However, there is something else the scientists may do. They can give us the facts about the physical nature of these social problems. In other words, they can mark off the limit, the boundaries within which we have to work in solving them.

The members of the Atomic Energy Commission meet this situation every day. The men of science have to tell us how policies that we might adopt would work in the physical world we are dealing with. This function of communication is a very real responsibility of the scientists. They can save us from wasting our time with policies and solutions that just won't work.

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The writings of men like Conant and of Bush and Oppenheimer geared to the understanding of the intelligent layman are a very real social contribution. We welcome also their advice and suggestions for the solution of complex social, political, and economic problems facing us today. But here their special competence is less. They become a few among many whose views must go into the shaping of a national or international policy.

### Scientist and Politics

Now a final thought. How many scientists are there in Congress, in the state legislature, in city government, in town councils? Very few, I would venture. Now, is it good or bad? It would be interesting, I think, to have the views of the other members of this panel on this point: Should scientists descend from the ivory tower of the seeker after fact and throw themselves into the heat and dirt of common, ordinary partisan politics?

To sum up then, it seems to me, as a layman, as a nonscientist, that in this world of the mid-twentieth century, men of science do have some very special social responsibilities. What do the scientists themselves think about it?

MR. MCBURNEY: Thank you, Mr. Dean. And now may I present the other members of our panel. Mr. Karl Lark-Horovitz, Professor of Physics at Purdue University; Mrs. Susanne K. Langer, visiting Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University, and O. W. Eshbach, Dean of the Technological Institute at Northwestern University. You have heard Gordon Dean's remarks. Lark-Horovitz, what are your reactions to his position?

MR. LARK-HOROVITZ: Mr. Dean raises the question: How far are scientists participating in the various legislatures? Perhaps I may remind you that on the Continent, in the various parliaments, and in England it has been customary that outstanding scientists, also outstanding artists, are elected to the so-called Upper House, and so you will find men like Bertrand Russell, the mathematician, and Lord Rutherford, the great physicist, participating in the House of Lords. They have the advantage there of hearing expert advice on scientific and technical questions on the floor of the House. What would you think if we would have Senators-at-Large representing scientific and technological advances in our Senate?

MR. MCBURNEY: What would you think of that, Eshbach?

### Education and Advice

MR. ESHBACH: I agree with Mr. Dean and Mr. Lark-Horovitz. Certainly one of the important functions of the scientist in regard to our social welfare is, and will be for some time, the education of people concerning the consequences of scientific development. I don't think we can expect scientists as people to be any wiser politically than others. Of course, their advice on policy should be heard, particularly on technical questions. It isn't any accident that many of our scientists are appointed advisers to political bodies.

I would like to point out the minority group about which we are talking. The number of scientists in this country is too small to be effective in direct political action. Their number in other countries is still smaller. For example, in this country our scientific progress today depends upon one-half of our population, or about 750,000 people. This includes the engineers and scientists; but only about a tenth of a per cent, a fifth of the half, are really engaged in scientific and development work, and only about a fifth of these, or one-fiftieth per cent, are highly educated people with what we would call the doctor's degree. The proportion is smaller in other countries, and it is this group that we are talking about.

MR. MCBURNEY: You say half our population. You mean one-half of one per cent.

MR. ESHBACH: Yes.

**Mr. McBurney:** One-half of one per cent of the population which is considerably different. Mrs. Langer, how about this? Do you want scientists in Congress?

**Mrs. Langer:** No, I don't want scientists in Congress because I think a scientist who gave his time to wrestling around with party politics would very soon lose his competence as a scientist; but I think it would be an excellent thing if you had scientists in close touch with the Cabinet, in close touch with teachers of the people, so that they know what the dangers are that exist in this extraordinarily sharp instrument which science has put into their hands. I would like to see scientists consulted but not called upon to waste their time in politics.

## Scientist Consultants

**Mr. Lark-Horovitz:** I quite agree with that. I think the main contribution which scientists have to make nowadays is to bring science to the people, and that can only be done if the scientists will make a serious effort to clarify the social implications of an invention to the people at large. That is particularly necessary because of the unusually long time-lag between the discovery, which cannot be foreseen or aimed at, and the invention which is made for a purpose. So the scientist has to be instrumental in eliminating the irresponsible claims made by advertising or so-called scientific fellow-travelers who use the language of science to bring about confusion. He has to eliminate exaggeration and misinterpretation of scientific information. Now, it is quite true most scientists are not also at the same time writers, but we have in this country a large number of science writers. I think it is the duty of every scientist to help the daily press and the science writers in every way to make it possible for the people to understand what the social implications of science are.

**Mr. McBurney:** Do you think this is a new responsibility of scientists, this responsibility of clarification?

**Mr. Lark-Horovitz:** This responsibility, the scientist really has had all the time, but it becomes in a certain sense new because of the specialization of science. If you will remember, there was a time when all science was part of what is called natural philosophy. It was the chair of physics. In the English University it is still called the chair of natural philosophy, and men like Kant of Germany used to lecture not only on ethics and aesthetics and moral philosophy, but on mechanics, on chemistry, or astronomy. All this was called philosophy. Nowadays the scientist is so specialized that he has a particular duty (a) to educate his fellow scientists in other fields, and (b) to collaborate with science writers to make science understandable for the people.

## Philosophical Conceptions

**Mrs. Langer:** It seems to me that to make science understandable for the people is not sufficient, that what the people should do with science after they understand its possibilities is the most urgent question. The possibilities are all that the scientist or science writer can convey, can educate them in. What they are to do with science rests fundamentally on philosophical questions, on philosophical conceptions and aims. Now, the business of the philosophers is to clarify ideas. It is no longer their business to go in for scientific teaching. The reason why science has split off is the same reason why philosophy should finally come to terms with its own problems.

**Mr. McBurney:** Now, to go back to Mr. Dean's opening remarks, there is no question that modern science has dumped some pretty serious problems in our laps. Science has made enormous progress. We seem to be agreed upon that. Scientists have given us the atomic bomb. They have given us all sorts of modern inventions, and we are now beginning to wonder whether those inventions aren't instruments of destruction. The question we ask is:

What are the scientists' responsibilities in terms of using these inventions that they have brought to light? Eshbach?

MR. ESHBACH: I agree with Mrs. Langer that the answer depends a lot on what we consider the ethical and moral viewpoint. We all agree that we are against war, against aggression. We are willing to use all means including science to defend our way of life, and our opposition here to the use of science for warfare is due to a changed attitude toward war itself because of the apparent violence which will result.

## War Applications

I think we should introduce here at this time a little perspective on the degree to which the applications of science have been accelerated. The application of science to war isn't new. Actually, you can go back to the time of Archimedes, but we probably could begin with the development of applied science three hundred years ago, or let's say in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Galileo was professor of military science. Leonardo da Vinci advertised himself as a military engineer. What we today consider as engineering didn't develop until two hundred years ago in France, and the history of what we are thinking about in terms of the application of science occurred largely within the centennial history of Northwestern University. It was in France and England that the idea of civil engineering as distinguished from military engineering began the whole series of professional groups of engineering in the United States which we now call traditional, electrical, mechanical and civil. But it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the application of specialized fields of science brought about the achievements we have today and their possible applications to warfare and violence. I would like Dr. Horovitz to comment on this.

MR. LARK-HOROVITZ: The awareness of possible abuses of modern science came after the first World War during which time scientists on a large scale started to participate in the design and construction not only of weapons but entirely new strategy such as airplanes, radio, chemical warfare, poison gas. It is interesting that in the true Christian spirit in the sixteenth century when ballistics was first developed, a famous Italian mathematician refused to publish his results on ballistics because it would further warfare, but when the Turks attacked in 1531, then he said, "I should have stuck to these studies in warfare because I might have been able actually to defend the republic."

## World Cooperation

Now, as we know, scientists as an organized group began to function in the thirties and pointed to the necessity of studying the social impact of modern science. Science and social welfare was the theme of the British Association meeting in Blackpool in '36. In 1937 the Council of the American Association for the Advancement of Science resolved to extend to all other scientific organizations throughout the world an invitation to cooperate not only for the advancement of science, but also for the promotion of peace and intellectual freedom in order that science may continue to advance and spread more abundantly its benefits to all of mankind. At the same time a proposal was made that a Society for the Study of Social Relations of Science be founded. This resulted in the organization of the special Division of the British Association of the Social and International Relations of Science which was organized in 1938 in Cambridge.

MRS. LANGER: I wonder to what extent the Council—what was its name—on the Relation of Science to Social Welfare—took up the basic ethical, that is strictly philosophical questions, there involved? I am not asking whether there were philosophers present because a great deal of philosophical thinking is not done by professional philosophers. It is done often by scientists. It should be done much more than it is by statesmen, but I wonder whether the complete absence of philosophical advisers in a case like this does not very often allow great confusions of fundamental issues, so that you start somewhere halfway up the ladder instead of at the bottom.

## Symposiums

MR. LARK-HOROVITZ: I can answer this question regarding the Blackpool meeting. Philosophy was represented to some extent by Sir Richard Gregory, the famous editor of Nature who has been giving a great deal of thought to the philosophical and ethical problems involved in the application of science. And at the bicentenary meeting in Princeton there was a special symposium held on the physical sciences and human values. Northrup of Yale, as you know, a philosopher, gave a great deal of discussion on the philosophical and ethical question which you raised.

MR. MCBURNEY: Let me get back to our basic question: "What are the social responsibilities of scientists?" Now, you scientists on our panel have made it perfectly clear that in this year of our Lord the scientists have a responsibility in the way of clarifying their discoveries and their inventions so people will understand them. Mrs. Langer, however, persists in the question: Do scientists have a responsibility in the matter of determining policy as to how these inventions should be used? Now, would you speak specifically to that question?

MR. LARK-HOROVITZ: I think to a certain extent they have, but you see, when people talk nowadays about moral and social responsibilities of scientists, they always speak about the atomic bomb. It is a good thing they do, because it is probably the most important consideration of our time. There are certain fields of science, however, where the scientist definitely has a moral obligation to insist on the application of science. I mean here the health program where science has done so much and could do still more, the program of nutrition, scientific farming, and population programs. In all these cases science should actually insist on the application that is entirely for beneficial and peace-time uses, but you know that all the applications of scientific progress depend to a large extent on the social climate, and usually there are great difficulties before such an actual status can be accepted.

## Responsibility of Philosopher

MR. MCBURNEY: How does the philosopher and the moral thinker and political leader complement the scientist in the role that Lark-Horovitz was just describing?

MRS. LANGER: I should say the business of the philosopher is to clarify those underlying ideas which determine what is, in fact, the social welfare, whether the social welfare stops at political borders and is furthered by the relative destruction of other political groups, so that at least they can't, let's say, be as strong as our own, or whether the social welfare in a world which is industrially and economically one does not rest on the social welfare of the population of the earth as a whole. Now, you may very well say: But philosophers don't clarify these ideas. I am sorry that in that case I must agree with you. The philosophers, I think, have very largely fallen down. I say it with shame. I am frankly ashamed of that failure. Not enough work has been done. Instead of loading up the scientists with a responsibility which I think is excessive, because as a group they are already perhaps the most serious and hard-working and hard-thinking part of the population, I would rather see the people (who are after all the ruling body in this country) make a rigorous and vigorous demand on their philosophers to prepare themselves with as hard and exacting work as the scientists. There are, in fact, no bodies of facts to be learned in philosophy, but there are techniques.

MR. MCBURNEY: I was about to say that was a remarkably modest statement, Mrs. Langer. However, I am not sure it is because you wind up by assigning terrific responsibilities to the philosophers. Where does that leave you, Eshbach?

## Depends on Social Climate

**Mr. Eshbach:** I was just thinking that you cannot avoid political responsibility because social and scientific progress depend to a large extent on the social climate in which it is nurtured. For example, when the political situation is directed or oriented toward the welfare of the people as contrasted to the power of the state, then I think you have a possibility of international peace, and then you have a possibility of the scientist and the social worker and the philosopher working in harmony.

**Mr. McBurney:** Yes, but when that situation doesn't exist, when you have a world situation which looks something like moral collapse and you hand these statesmen and these people weapons which you scientists produce, you then have the problem we are talking about here today.

**Mr. Eshbach:** What I am saying simply is that the direct responsibility is political.

**Mrs. Langer:** Whose direct responsibility?

**Mr. Eshbach:** The people are responsible.

**Mrs. Langer:** The people—I agree.

**Mr. Lark-Horovitz:** How can the people be responsible if they don't understand what they are handling? You see, I think there is a great difficulty involved altogether. We have modern technology, very complicated and very sophisticated, superimposed upon a rather primitive mind. The mind of man has not particularly changed, neither in its superstitions nor in its belief in mystics or anything since the time of Christ. There is the conflict. You have modern man, emotionally just as he was two thousand years ago, but technologically advanced, and what are you going to do about it?

**Mr. McBurney:** Since that is the case, why do you scientists hand this primitive man sharp knives and weapons and atomic guns and whatnot, Lark-Horovitz? Aren't you remiss in your moral responsibility? Maybe you had better close up your shop for awhile.

**Mr. Lark-Horovitz:** No, I don't think stopping science would stop it at all.

**Mr. McBurney:** What is the answer? Do we turn to Mrs. Langer here as our hope in the philosopher? Where is it? You can't abdicate your responsibilities, ladies and gentlemen, by saying, "Well, we have to depend on the people." They look to you for leadership. Where is their leadership?

**Mrs. Langer:** It seems to me this leadership has to come out of the philosophical profession exactly the way technological leadership comes ultimately out of the scientific profession. Now, it is a fact that philosophers have fallen down, but there is no use sitting down and weeping about it because, in fact, I think that the human mind is perfectly capable of growing up even at an accelerated rate, and what makes people grow up is emergency. Now, we live in a constant moral emergency. If you have a nine-year-old boy, you do not ordinarily hand him a sharp axe.

**Mr. McBurney:** That is what I was saying a minute ago.

## 'Can't Afford to Be Childish'

**Mrs. Langer:** You usually give him a safe little hatchet to play with first, but when a boy grows up in a pioneer society he has to be able to handle a sharp axe by the time he is nine or ten. He cannot afford to be childish. Now, the same thing holds for us all. There is no use asking: Is science good or bad for us? Science is here. It is in our hands like the sharp axe. We are pioneer children in a new world, and we simply cannot afford to be childish.

**Mr. McBurney:** We have had these

constructive answers. It has been perfectly clear that the scientist has a popularizing role to play, the role of clarification. There still seems to be question in this whole matter of policy. Who is going to make the decisions? And that question, it seems to me, we haven't answered adequately. Mr. Dean did have one suggestion. He suggested that the introduction of science into the art of policy and affairs might be of great benefit. I take that to mean that the application of scientific method to questions of policy and value might contribute to the solution of those problems. What do you think of that, Mrs. Langer?

**Mrs. Langer**: I don't know what I think of that.

**Mr. McBurney**: Can you solve these questions of value and policy by the kind of method the scientists have found so successful?

**Mrs. Langer**: No, philosophy has its own methods, and I do believe if you get philosophical clarity into your ideas, you will know what you want. You will know what you want to use and why . . .

**Announcer**: I am sorry, Mrs. Langer and gentlemen, but our time is up.

# Suggested Readings

Compiled by Eugen Eisenlohr
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University.

BERNAL, JOHN DESMOND. *The Social Function of Science.* London, Routledge [1939].

Traces the history of the influence of science on society up to 1937 and forecasts what it could do after that period.

British Association for the Advancement of Science. *Report of the Annual Meeting, 1936.* London, The Association, 1936.

The conclusions of the Blackpool Meeting in which the social consequences of scientific discoveries were discussed.

CONANT, JAMES BRYANT. *Science and Common Sense.* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1951.

CONANT, JAMES BRYANT. *On Understanding Science.* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1947.

Discusses scientific education of layman.

GREGORY, SIR RICHARD ARMAN. *Cultural Contacts of Science.* (Elihu Root lectures of Carnegie Institution of Washington on the influence of science and research on current thought. Fifth lecture) Washington, D. C. [Printed by Judd and Detweiler] 1938.

Emphasizes the idea that science and ethics cannot be divorced, but that the social implications of the study of science must be considered.

GREGORY, SIR RICHARD ARMAN. *Gods and Men; a Testimony of Science and Religion.* London, Macmillan, 1949.

Mid-Century Convocation on the Social Implications of Scientific Progress, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1949. *Mid-Century; the Social Implications of Scientific Progress.* Cambridge, Published jointly by the Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Wiley, New York, 1950.

Verbatum account of the discussions held at the Institute on the occasion of its Mid-Century Convocation, March 31, April 1 and 2, 1949. Chapter headings include: the state of science; men against nature; men against men; science, materialism and the human spirit.

Princeton Bi-Centennial Conference on the Future of Nuclear Science, Princeton University, 1946. *Physical Science and Human Values, a Symposium.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947.

SEARES, FREDERICK H. *The Concept of Uniformity.* (Elihu Root lectures of Carnegie Institution of Washington on the influence of science and research on current thought. Supplementary publication, No. 37) Washington, D. C. [Printed by Roberts] 1938.

Shows that the history of science as a humanizing force is still to be written.

STAUFFER, ROBERT CLINTON. *Science and Civilization.* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1949.

Eight outstanding educators representing the fields of philosophy, history, physical science, biological science, and social science contribute their special insights to the relationship between science and civilization."

STANDEN, ANTHONY. *Science Is a Sacred Cow.* New York, Dutton, 1950.

A satirical comment on Scientism showing that blind obeisance can be perilous.

*Atlantic* 187:28-30, Jan., '51. "Faith in Science." I. I. RABI.

Dr. Rabi, who won the Nobel Prize in 1944 for his work in atomic physics, concludes that the tradition of science teaches man self-discipline, the need for constant reexamination of his thought, moderation, and a tolerance of ideas because it shows "every view as subject to change and every truth we know as only partial."

*Christian Science Monitor Magazine* p. 3+, Dec. 23; 3+, Dec. 30, '50. "World at Mid-Century." E. D. CANHAM.

The new enlightenment challenges science to see life as socially based on cooperation, love and unity.

*Commonweal* 51:632+, Mar. 24, '50. "Man versus Scientism." A. DEVOE.

Man, the spirit, with his ideas of responsibility compared to the type of scientist who has little use for the layman, or things unscientific.

*Nation* 170:492-4, My. 20, '50. "The Scientists' Responsibility." A. J. CARLSON.

A professor of physiology at the University of Chicago points out the incongruity of trying to eliminate the pollution of our air and water while we build atomic bombs which will ruin both air and water for years to come.

*New Republic* 124:11-12, Feb. 5, '51. "Scientists and the Great Debate." A. G. MEZERIK.

Gives the goal of the Society for Social Responsibility in Science and points out why scientists need to be aware of the social and economic implications of their work.

*New Statesman and Nation* 37:124-5, Feb. 5, '49. "Science out of Step." R. CALDER.

The need for science to be realized as Natural Philosophy so that it can be reconciled with Moral Philosophy and established as one of the Humanities.

*New York Times Magazine* p. 9+, Mar. 19, '50. "Science to Save Us from Science." B. RUSSELL.

Can a society based on science and scientific technique have the stability of societies in the past or does it necessarily develop explosive forces that will destroy it? The author concludes that the answer is in wanting for other nations what we would have for our own.

*Survey* 86:347-50, Jl., '50. "Human Engineering, for Better or for Worse." E. CROOK.

The need for human engineering to stop man's lopsided drive toward so called progress.

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